DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 266 566 EC 181 730

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TITLE Higher Education for the Learning Disabled--They Deserve It.
PUB DATE 22 Oct 85
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; *College Students; Higher Education; *Learning Disabilities; Study Skills; *Tutorial Programs; Tutoring

ABSTRACT

The paper describes the background and development of HELP (Higher Education for Learning-disabled People). The HELP program located at Marshall University (West Virginia) provides testing to determine the presence of a learning disability; individual tutoring in reading, spelling, and written expression; oral tests; note-taking instruction; study skills instruction; counseling regarding personal adjustment; and a summer program to improve basic academic and school survival skills. The case study of a young man with severe dyslexia is offered to illustrate the program's effectiveness. (CL)

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HIGHER EDUCATION FOR THE LEARNING DISABLED --

THEY DESERVE IT

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October 22, 1985

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HIGHER EDUCATION FOR THE LEARNING DISABLED -- THEY DESERVE IT

Ten years ago when I began teaching at the college level I discovered that the university is not exempt from the learning disabled. I began to notice that a number of seemingly intelligent students were dropping out of college. Several professors asked me to talk with them before they withdrew because the professors were suspicious that they were learning disabled. I began to test these young people and found that most of them had IQs of 110-140, but they were reading and spelling on elementary or junior high levels. Many of them still exhibited evidence of reversals and transposals. To say that their spelling was bizarre would be an understatement! Most of them had classic cases of learning disabilities, and I wondered how they could have been overlooked during their 12 years in public school. Gradually the answer became apparent to me: their intelligence was superior. They were able to cope. They were not behavior problems, and they did not present crisis situations. Therefore, they had been passed on. Many of them had been working on grade level at some point during the public school experience, but because of superior intelligence, they should have been achieving several years above grade level. I might add that most of these young people confessed to me that they thought they were mentally retarded or seriously emotionally disturbed. Why else would they not be able to read well? Recently a young man with whom I was speaking looked around to be certain that no one was in ear shot. Then he confided, "I have never read one of my textbooks!" In spite of this, he was able to maintain a "C" average. Could you

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do that?

Four years ago I decided that something had to be done about these capable young people who have so much to offer our society. I applied for funds through the Marshall Foundation to begin a small tutoring program for college students who are learning disabled. During the past four years the program has grown from 2 graduate assistants and 6 learning disabled students to 7 graduate assistants and 60 learning disabled students. I direct the program half-time and coordinate the Learning Disabilities Program in the Graduate School at the university half time.

It is my belief that a tutoring program for learning disabled students can exist at a limited expense to a university. This is a special service, and students should expect to pay for that service. If they are clients of Vocational Rehabilitation, tutoring expenses will be paid by them.

Services for the Learning Disabled Student

Higher Education for Learning-disabled People (H.E.L.P) began September, 1980, and students who had previously failed in school began to experience success. The services which H.E.L.P. provides are as follows:

a. We provide testing to determine if a learning disability is present at no charge to the student. Graduate assistants do the testing during spare time when they are not tutoring students. Intelligence is evaluated as well as strengths and weaknesses in reading, spelling, written language, arithmetic, and language development.

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b. Individual tutoring is provided to assist the student in improving his/her reading, spelling, and written expression skills. With most students we use a multi-sensory structured phonics program such as Orton-Gillingham. A program which has been very helpful with college students is Solving Language Difficulties by Amy Steere and Alpha to Omega by B. Hornsby. An attempt is made to integrate the teaching of reading and spelling skills with textbook reading assignments and assignments that require writing.

c. Individual tutoring is provided to help the student with any classes he/she is taking for which there is some concern. We maintain a liaison between student and professor to be certain that there are no unwanted surprises such as a term paper during the semester. We also have small group sessions when we have several students enrolled in the same class such as Biology, which is required of all freshmen.

d. Oral tests are given to students for whom they have been prescribed. We call the professor before the examination to ask for suggestions regarding how we might help the student study for the test. Often valuable information is provided by the professor regarding advisable areas of concentration of study. At the beginning of the semester a form letter is sent to each professor (with the student's written permission) stating the problems that the student may experience in class and stating exceptions that will be needed when tests are administered.

e. Improvement in note taking is emphasized. We teach the student to take notes with as little writing as possible. We teach

students to read the chapter before going to class so that they will be familiar with the material. Students are instructed to divide a sheet of their notebook in half vertically. On the right side of the page the student writes notes from the chapter as he reads it. The left side of the page is used for additional notes that are taken in class that may not have been included in the chapter that was read. This seems to work very well for our students. It provides the structure that some of them seem to need. Those who need more structure than they can obtain from the above technique are encouraged to follow the outline that may be found in A Skeleton in Every Closet by Mary Lee Enfield. This outline forces a person to organize what is being written. Students who seem to be unable to take notes any other way have found success using Enfield's approach.

f. Improvement in study skills is a necessity for most of our students. Weekly seminars of one hour each are offered. There are sessions on studying for a test effectively, how to take multiple choice exams, how to cram if you must, how to improve your memory, etc. These sessions are well attended, and students feel that they are very helpful. Many of them participated in similar sessions when they were younger, but they did not appreciate their value at that time. Now, with additional maturity, they understand how important improvement in these areas is, and they are much more attentive than they probably were several years ago.

g. Frustration and depression plague the learning disabled college student, and a large part of our task is to provide a haven where the students can "unload" their feelings. Our students often come to us after they have taken an exam which they are certain they have failed. It helps to have an understanding friend who will reassure the student that the answers had some merit. On a few occasions the student has been urged to talk with the professor about the test that day so that tears would not be shed all weekend.

h. Next , we encourage our students to be honest with their future employers. It is better for the student to tell the employer of a learning disability than for the employer to discover it for himself.

i. We strongly urge our students not to join a fraternity or sorority during their freshman year in college. They need the time that would be devoted to the social group to be given to studying. They must not only prove to the university officials that they can be successbut, but more importantly, they must prove it to themselves. The area of utmost importance must be that of academic success. Many of our students have not learned to think of themselves as successful students. This negative concept must be overcome, and it is difficult to do this when frequent sorority/fraternity meetings must be attended.

j. A summer program was offered last year for the first time to learning disabled college students. They were encouraged to take one class in the morning, and they enrolled in our program from 12:30-4:30 p.m. on Monday through Friday for the first summer session. They

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were in groups of no more than five per group and attention was directed to improving skills in reading, spelling, and written expression, as well as improving study skills, notetaking skills, etc. A liaison between the professor and learning disabled student was maintained so that the student could more effectively be tutored in the class in which he was enrolled. There were twelve students in the program, and every student passed the course which was taken. Half of these students were recent high school graduates, and this program gave them a gradual, less traumatic introduction to college. It was also possible to attempt to remediate areas of weakness without being overwhelmed with classroom assignments. This program was found to be very successful and will be offered again.

In order to more effectively tell you about our program in action, it seems appropriate to discuss the experiences of one of our students, whose name is James.

The Rebirth of James -- A College Student Learns to Read

James is now twenty-one years of age. He is a Junior at Marshall University, although this is his fourth year in college. James has severe dyslexia, which was diagnosed two years ago. At that time his football coach brought this frightened young man to my office, saying he thought James had dyslexia. He had noticed that James had serious problems with reversals and transposals. James was almost a non-reader. How did he get this far without his very obvious problem not being diagnosed? Let us take a moment to look at his past history.

James grew up in a small town. When he entered junior high school, it became apparent that he would be a superb athlete. He was well liked by teachers and peers; he was unusually handsome with a perfect physique. But he couldn't read! What was wrong with this young man?

When he was in the eighth grade, he was tested and placed in a class for the mentally retarded. It is not known how he was tested; nor do we know the results of his testing. He may have been tested by someone to whom he could not relate; he may have been tested in a noisy environment; he may have been ill at the time of the testing. At any rate, he was removed from the regular classroom where he was receiving failing grades and

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placed in a self-contained class for the mentally retarded. He remained in this placement until he graduated from high school.

When James was a Senior in high school, he received scholarships to three colleges, one of them being very well known. He accepted the scholarship to Marshall University because it was not too far from home, and he sincerely liked the coach who had recruited him.

When he arrived on campus and began arranging his course schedule, he confessed to his coach that he could not read. The coach arranged for him to have individual tutoring in a remedial reading program on campus throughout the summer. He floundered through his Freshman year, taking easy courses and dropping courses that he could not pass. At the beginning of his Sophomore year, the Marshall Foundation began the sponsorship of the Tutoring Program for Learning Disabled Marshall Students, and James' coach saw that he was the first person to apply. It is interesting that after spending twelve years in our public schools that a football coach is the one who recognized his learning problem and tried to do something about it!

At our first meeting James told me, through eyes filled with tears, that he would give anything in the world to read. He talked about how embarrassing being a non-reader has been to him - about trips to restaruants with the football team when he was handed a menu he couldn't read, and when he was asked to read a passage in a class. At our first meeting I became convinced of one thing, and

that was that James is not mentally retarded. His comments were perceptive and intelligent, and I made a promise to myself and to James that I would do whatever was possible to help him learn as much as he could.

After James had been in the tutoring program about two months, I asked him if he would be willing to talk to one of my graduate classes, and he readily accepted. My graduate students' eyes were filled with tears as this handsome young man who looked as if he had everything told them one horror story after another. He has a delightful sense of humor which was interspersed with his comments, relaxing the atmosphere in the highly charged room. I asked James if he found it helped to take oral exams, and he responded that he had not been given any oral exams, and that he was failing all of his classes. His tutor had told me that James was doing well! After class most of my students came to me and said they wanted to help James in any way they could.

The next morning I called his professors, and they all agreed to let him retake his mid-term exams orally. One professor would not let me give James the exam, but insisted that he give the exam himself. At that time I didn't realize how test shy James had become. The professor had to chase James down the hall twice to get him to return to his office. He had run out, saying that he was dumb and didn't know anything. He passed the exams I gave him, but he received a "57" on the exam given by the professor. James told me that he looked at the professor and thought how brilliant the man was and how dumb he was. He said that he couldn't say anything for fear of showing his ignorance to the professor. I talked

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with the professor and reiterated what James had told me. Then I took a deep breath, mustered my courage, and asked if I could give the exam to James - just to see how well he could do. I didn't expect the professor to change the grade after the third administration of the mid-term exam. When I completed the exam with James, we discovered that he had received an "80", a passing grade!

That was the beginning of a new life for James. For the first time since he entered kindergarten he believed that he had some strengths in academics. My graduate students met with James seven days a week for extra tutoring, and he never missed a session. He had two tutoring sessions on weekends.

Gradually his grades began to improve. James began to talk in class, and he joked with his peers. Previously he had tried to appear to be invisible, hoping that no one would notice that he was there. One day when James was depressed, he told me that he thought he should give up his athletic scholarship and give it to someone who really deserved it. In spite of his success in class, he still thought of himself as being inferior to other people at times. At the first hint of failure, I discovered that James became quite depressed, and at times he was unable to function as a student because of his depression. It appeared to me that Depression was our arch enemy that must be conquered.

James has remained in college, making satisfactory grades, and occasionally he makes an "A". One week ago he took his first exam in written form, and he received a grade of "C". If he had taken the exam orally, he could have made a higher grade, but the experience of passing a written examination meant more to him than words can express. If all goes well, he should graduate in another year.

What does the future hold for James? Only time will tell. He hopes to work in a boys' club, working with underprivileged boys. His reversal problem shouldn't be a great handicap in such a position. He still becomes depressed when he doesn't succeed, but he refuses to seek assistance for this problem. He feels that he can cope with it himself. His written language continues to be a serious deficit because of the reversal/transposal problem. Under pressure, his writing deteriorates markedly.

Without a perceptive coach and a tutoring program designed to help James with his problems in learning, what would the future hold for him? In all probability he would be another of the many recipients of unemployment compensation, unable to obtain a job because he couldn't read — couldn't complete the application form. In James' words, "I would be sitting on the curb with other do-nothings, watching the world pass me by. Now that I can read, I am going to make this world a better place." Knowing James as I do, I believe that he will do just that.

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